HOW I LIVED 3 YEARS on BROADWAY by MY WITS

Waiting for the Stranger on Broadway.

Sayings of Broadway's "Most Polished Vagabond"

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"Stop, look, listen, before you speak."

"I'd rather be broke on Broadway than have a ten-spot anywhere else, any time."

"Everyone on Broadway who is anybody is always susceptible to the man with wits."

"If you're broke, don't let Broadway know it. If you do, you're lost."

"When on Broadway you want to get away, and when away you want to get back."

"Those who like Broadway don't know why; neither do those who detest it."

"You must appear to be busy, even though you have no business, if you are to remain on Broadway."

"Don't attempt to borrow; Broadway has no use for a borrower."

BY MAURICE B. HAAS.

"Laugh and the world laughs with you, Weep, and you weep alone."

THIS is my basic rule of life, close observance of which has enabled me to live on New York's Broadway without working, without an income, without any visible means of support, without any permanent place of abode, for more than three years.

And live well, too.

This rule, together with vigorous employment of my wits, has enabled me to stay at the most exclusive hotels, dine at the gayest and most expensive restaurants, drink the most select wines, wear the most fashionable clothes and to revel to the utmost in all the joys of Broadway, ofttimes without a dollar in my pockets and sans the knowledge whence the next meal was to come.

W. B. HAAS

How did I do it?

Well, I was born with a smile, born an optimist. Worry and "New York's most polished vagabond," as I have been called, always have been strangers, always will be. A perennial smile and inborn cheerfulness are my best assets. To live on Broadway or anywhere else without tangible resources you must posses:

An amiable disposition.

A pleasing personality.

An engaging smile.

Thorough knowledge of human nature.

Affability.

Knowledge of the city, its life, its ideals, its people and, above all, the ability to immediately mark the stranger to Broadway.

A good wardrobe, coupled with an air of prosperity.

Energy.

In Funds!

An unlimited insouciance and assurance, commonly called NERVE.

Quite an extensive equipment for one person! Yet, so they say, I possess them all. Anyway, be that as it may, I solved the mystery of wresting a living from Broadway—the "Gay White Way"—where, as all the world knows, if you are to see anything, extract any pleasure, you must have money and lots of it.

Another thing. You must never let it be known you are broke on Broadway, **and you must never borrow money.**

Hard Lines, But Why Not Be Cheerful?

Broadway loathes a borrower, and short is his shrift once it becomes known. I have stood breakfastless, dinnerless, on Broadway without a penny in my pockets, but borrow, never! That is, of my friends or acquaintances. Hailed by hundreds with:

"Hello, how are you."

"Fine," I would say.

Then would come Broadway's stock invitation: "Have a drink?" for liquor is the easiest thing in the world to get along the "White Way." Into Rector's, Shanley's, the Waldorf, Martin's, the Knickerbocker, or wherever I happened to be, and it would be a drink and often a bottle of wine when coffee and rolls would have been much more acceptable, not to say more sustaining.

I could acquire a beautiful jag every day without a dime to back me up if I so desired, for Broadway loves companionship — the well-met sort of fellow upon whom the cafes thrive. But ask the man who bought the wine for a quarter to get a meal, and nine out of ten he couldn't see you the next time you chanced to pass. It's the same with a dinner, or the theater. Everyone wants to buy — but on their initiative. But ASK someone to buy a dinner! The Arctic would seem a tropical paradise compared to the atmosphere on Broadway.

But how did I live on Broadway? I've said you can't borrow and you can't ask a Broadway habitue to buy you a meal. And dinner invitations are not always in evidence, particularly at just the time you're inclined to dine.

When I first went to New York from Cleveland, where I was born and reared, I obtained employment with a theatrical publication, for which I worked three years. In the course of that time I made it my business to form the acquaintance of every person worth knowing connected with the theatrical profession — house managers, company managers, producers, booking agents, actors, actresses, chorus girls, press agents, not overlooking the man in the box office or the doorkeeper—and once acquainted, believe me, I never allowed them to forget me. Every time I met one of them, no matter where or when, I placed my smile in commission, extended my hand and had a cheery word, also often a bit of gossip, true or not, about their friends, and left them with a more or less warm feeling in their breasts for me. If strangers chanced to be with them, so much the better. Introductions were bound to be forthcoming, thus widening my circle of acquaintances.

I do not believe there is a man in the world **who knows as many persons in the theatrial** profession as I do. And, living "by my wits" as I do, I have yet to suffer the humiliation of any one of them, from the celebrities to the least known, deny my acquaintance or administer a rebuff. They are my friends because I have always sought to make myself useful to them, and have succeeded in many instances.

My sphere of activity along Broadway ranged from 39th to 50th street. In that region I was always in evidence, day and night. That is, what **Broadway terms day and night, for** Broadway's day does not begin until noon, and night means until at least 3 or 4 a. m.

Through my theatrical associations I became intimately acquainted with all the hotel, restaurant and cafe men along Broadway — from proprietor to bellhop—and could call nearly all the men-about-town, chauffeurs, policemen and habitues of my territory by their first names. And they all knew me, for I never permitted any hiatus in acquaintanceship. It was my chief asset, and invaluable later on as you will learn.

When the theatrical paper for which I was working struck the financial rocks and ceased to exist as far as I was concerned, I had less than $20. That night I sought a quiet restaurant where I might dine and map out a course for the future. The restaurant to which I repaired was quiet enough—at that time. Not more than a dozen persons were seated at the forty or more tables when I entered. I knew the proprietor, Louis Martin. In the course of my cogitations he came to my table to inquire regarding the service, and I invited him to sit with me. I told him of my troubles and he told me of his, for business with him was mighty slim. Gloom loves company, and it was the first time in my life that I had ever experienced the slightest worry regarding the future. But I forgot my troubles as I became interested in those of Martin. He had a beautiful restaurant, then as now, at Broadway and 42d street, the heart of New York. The cuisine was unexcelled, the service perfection itself. But there was scarcely any business. A happy thought struck me. I borrowed the idea, too — one thing you can borrow in New York. A few nights previously I had dropped into Kid McCoy's rathskeller at 35th street and Broadway, a trifle outside the purlieus of my range. All was gayety at McCoy's, and business was top-notch. There was an orchestra, and girls and men were dancing among the tables; sometimes on top of them. Drinks were being served galore, and the waiters were kept on the jump.

Why not gayety in a high-class restaurant? I thought. Then the idea! For years I had been supplying ideas to theatrical managers and actors, gratis. Ideas for the improvement of acts, ideas in advertising. Why not supply an idea and get paid for it?

So I suggested to Martin the idea that later on developed into the cabaret, and enriched many a restaurateur and made Louis Martin's the most brilliant and famous restaurant in New York, as well as the most profitable—a condition that obtained for years, and does still.

The next night there was music at Martin's. We engaged professional dancers to waltz and two-step among the tables. We had singers, a monologist and a black-faced comedy act. I saw to it that the innovation at so high-grade a restaurant as Martin's got plenty of publicity. The following night Martin was compelled to turn people away. He paid me $150 on the spot for my idea, gave me carte blanche in the restaurant so far as eating and drinking were concerned and for months tore up all the checks I signed.

Thereupon I decided to live by my wits. Why work when I could get cash for ideas? So I started. I overlooked nothing. Ideas for actors, ideas for the improvement of advertising, ideas for show windows, ideas for business men, ideas for newspaper and magazine stories —anything and everything that promised to beget a dollar.

Traversing Broadway by night and by day, I had some sort of an idea, good or bad, for nearly every person I met. If the idea happened to be a good one and was accepted, fine! I collected pay for it. If it failed, I lost nothing.

Haas Welcomes a Returning Celebrity.

New York newspapers do not employ large reportorial staffs. They depend on the City News Bureau for the collection of news, in the main. If the story is "big" they detail a staff reporter to cover it. And they pay for news tips. With my wide acquaintance I knew what was doing along Broadway. If I heard of a scandal, a prospective divorce suit, an important robbery, or any bit of news the papers possibly might be late in getting, I was at the telephone at once, giving the "tip" to the city editor. If I happened to be first with the information, good! I was paid for it. If the story was unavailable or some one had beaten me to it, very well, I had lost only a minute's time.

Busy, busy, I was always busy.

My first duty of the day was to read all the newspapers closely. A new actress or a new actor was to sail from London, Paris, or Berlin for New York, he or she, of course, unacquainted with the methods of publicity in America. I made a memorandum. When the steamship arrived, I was at the pier, standing alongside the customs officer to learn the identity of my "prospect."

"You must have publicity to succeed here," was my greeting. Photographs? A story? I would explain how we arranged such things in New York. Of course, it would require a little money for my services. So much if I succeeded in placing the pictures and the story in the newspapers; so much in any event in case I failed, for my work would most assuredly bear fruits later. Sometimes I would get $10; sometimes $100. Once I got $500 for placing a story in which one of the leading opera singers figured. An advance payment, and a substantial sum if I succeeded was my method.

And to suppress a story. I could do that too, I would say, or try. In my Broadway rounds I would hear of a salacious morsel of scandal. Perhaps the newspapers had not heard of it, would not print it if they had. That made no difference to me. By telephone or otherwise I would arrange an appointment with the person or persons concerned. If the story failed to appear, they would pay me in the belief I suppressed it. Sometimes I did, sometimes I didn't. If it did appear, just a little time lost.

I would hear of a new business to be established, a hotel that was to be refurnished, new bar fixtures to be installed or any new enterprise requiring the expenditure of money. I was right on the job. I would forthwith tip a contractor —or half a dozen of them for that matter—saying I had influence with the prospective buyer and exacting a certain commission provided they got the contract.

But the stranger on Broadway! Ah, he it was who provided my most prolific source of income, and enabled me to REALLY LIVE, not merely exist, by my wits. I can spot him a mile away. Hundreds of him land on Broadway, the street of dreams, every day. And he always is supplied with plenty of money, for he has heard it requires cash to see the "White Way."

I prefer to meet him in a hotel bar, for he who patronizes the bar always is liberal with his money. A smile, a chance question and we are acquainted. Usually, I buy the first drink. But he is wary. He has heard of the pitfalls, the confidence men along Broadway. The bartender addresses me by name. That helps a little. Another drink or a cigar. Habitues come and go; I speak to them all, and they all speak to me. Presently a man high in the theatrical profession—a man whose name is a household word in all America—drops in. I address him by name. "How are you, Haas," is the reply. Will he have a drink with us? Certainly, for that is his mission in the bar. I introduce him to the stranger from Kankakee, who is only too delighted to buy. I guide the conversation into business channels. I'm considering an important proposition from Shubert, from Hammerstein, from Klaw and Erlanger, I tell the celebrity. My Kankakee friend is becoming impressed. Perhaps I'm all right, he begins to think. The hotel proprietor saunters in. I shake hands with him, too. The stranger's favorable impression grows. In the course of half an hour or so, perhaps half a dozen or more men of prominence, known by reputation to the stranger—celebrities he never dreamed of meeting personally—have addressed me by name, passed a pleasant word or two, and his confidence in me is complete.

Dinner follows, at his expense, of course. I suggest the theater—a round of them, for it is much easier for me to pass a friendly doorkeeper than to get tickets. A wave of the hand, a cheery "Hello, Henry," to the doorkeeper, and we are inside the theater before Henry has had a chance to protest, did he feel so inclined. We remain fifteen or twenty minutes, then I follow the same procedure at some other theater where I am sure of the ticket-collector.

But it is time to get some money before the night grows too old. So I put my "prospect" to the test. I am sorry, I say, that I cannot remain with him longer. Unfortunately, I tell him, I failed to go to the bank that day, not intending to stay in town over night, so am short of funds. I cannot further impose on his generosity, I say, as I am in the habit of keeping up my own end when out with a friend. I am sorry I must say good-night; I would like to take him to the Jardin du Danse, or to the Garden, or to Bustanoby's — famous restaurants of which he has heard by this time—where many of my chorus girl friends and associates celebrated in stage-land congregate after the theater, and have him meet some of them, but finances will not permit. Tomorrow night, I tell him, I will be in funds and only too glad to show him all the high spots of which New York boasts. He protests. Money is of no consequence, he insists. He has plenty of it. The night is young; he has only explored the crust of Broadway. Many drinks have warmed his spirits, and loosened the strings around the Kankakee bankroll; besides there's a potent appeal in the vision of a gay supper with a bevy of New York's prettiest chorus girls and the prospect of encountering more of Broadway's famous characters, well-known to him only through the public prints.

Never mind the money, he says. Let him pay the bills. No, I decide, regretfully. I am in the habit of paying my way, and all New York knows it. I cannot cheapen myself. Ah, he is struck with a happy thought! "Here, take twenty, or fifty for that matter from me," he insists. "You might as well spend it as me." I protest I cannot borrow money from a comparative stranger. Oh, no, it's not a loan, he declares. Why should I spend my money in entertaining him? He came to New York to have a good time, and expected to pay for it. There's another drink—and finally I am forced to accept a roll of bills.

I fulfill my part of the bargain. I know dozens of chorus girls eager to accept a dinner invitation. I have the addresses of twenty-five or thirty. I telephone to three or four of them, asking them to meet me at Rector's, the Garden or wherever we decide to go, for a party to be given by "a millionaire from Kankakee." A gay supper follows. My companion meets celebrity after celebrity, and returns to his hotel well satisfied with his first experience among the bright lights along Broadway. I have been sparing in my expenditures during the night. Usually I manage to save about 75 per cent of the "entertaining fund."

I have no permanent abode because I do not need one. I sleep in any hotel I chance to be near, letting my chance acquaintances from out of town pay the bills. They like to have me near for they are looking forward to the pleasures of another day.

My stock in trade consists of two suits of clothes, one of which is always at the tailor's being pressed; three or four shirts and as many collars in a daily service laundry, and of course a suit of evening clothes, so that when I appear on Broadway I am immaculate. I've dispensed with breakfast at times when things were going badly that I might appear with a fresh shave and polished shoes.

For you must present a "good front" if you are to live by your wits on Broadway.